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SUBJECT: Visit to Iranian Refugee Settlement in Iraqi Kurdistan

This is a Kurdistan Regional Reconstruction Team cable.

¶1. (SBU) RRT Officer and U.S. Civil Affairs Team Leader, 25th Infantry Division, visited Barika Refugee Open Settlement for Iranian Kurdish refugees in Sulaimaniyah Province in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq on December 6. By way of background, the settlement is home to approximately 277 Iranian Kurdish families, most of whom arrived from Al-Tash Refugee Camp in the Anbar Province of western Iraq in 2005. The settlement is administered by Qandil, a Swedish company funded by SIDA, the Swedish government's aid organization, which entered into a cooperative partnership with the United Nations.

OBSERVATIONS DURING VISIT TO REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

¶2. (SBU) RRT officer and CA Team Leader found the following during their visit to Barika Refugee Settlement.

¶3. (SBU) A seven-member council elected by the refugees themselves oversees the daily management of the settlement. The living conditions at the settlement are comparable to those of the Iraqi Kurdish residents living in an adjacent village on top of a hill named Barika, but the refugees want greater access to local services.

¶4. (SBU) The refugees live in 250 cement-block homes of three to five rooms with electricity, sewage, and water facilities. An additional 100 homes are under construction. They share their water supply with the adjacent Iraqi Kurdish village. The settlement residents have adequate water but must purchase water at times. There is a medical clinic on the site, but it has limited hours so people must travel to the hospital in Arbat town, about five kilometers away, in case of an emergency. The refugees maintain they need a larger school in the area to avoid double shifts for classes, but this is a common problem in the Kurdish region. The settlement relies on police protection from Arbat.

¶5. (SBU) The desire of the refugees in the settlement to assimilate is unclear. It appears they want third-country resettlement, but this is not an option because they enjoy freedom from persecution in Sulaimaniyah. The refugees in the settlement contend they can not hold government jobs or obtain an Iraqi driver's license.

REMARKS BY UNHCR DIRECTOR IN ERBIL

¶6. (SBU) On December 11 The UNHCR Director for the Kurdistan Region told RRT Officer that negotiations are underway with the local authorities in Sulaimaniyah to arrange for the refugees to obtain to obtain driver's licenses, purchase real estate, and hold fixed contract jobs in both the public and private sectors if they hold a UNHCR ration card. According to the director, Iranian Kurdish refugees in Erbil Province already have these rights.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Iran opposed the resettlement of refugees from Anbar to Sulaimaniyah province, claiming they were engaged in hostile political activity. Sulaimaniyah authorities may well be under pressure from Iran to limit refugee support and integration, but the UNHCR believes that it will be successful in obtaining the same rights for the refugees in Sulaiymaniyah as in Erbil.

Khalilzad